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ABSTRACT

Rural social workers occupy a number of statuses, such as professional social worker, organizational employee, rural community denizen, and private citizen/family member. Different groups may assign different priorities to the tasks that workers perform. Different audiences or groups may be at odds about definitions that are used in everyday life. The fact that cycles of peak activity vary from group to group can work to the worker's advantage or can cause even greater strains. Types of intensive, short-term therapy may be theoretically sound but situationally inappropriate. In a rural setting a worker is likely to be seen as a social worker 24 hours a day. One tool for reducing role strain is the rural-based professional group, where helping professionals band together to form support groups that are not only able to address community problems dynamically, but are also able to assist one another in ventilating frustrations and in searching for answers to practice dilemmas. Rural workers are also experimenting with old and new technologies to develop ways of moving information rather than people. Because of their relative freedom from bureaucratic constraints, techniques developed by rural workers may serve as the basis for assisting urban and suburban workers in the future. (BRR)

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REGION VII CHILD WELFARE TRAINING CENTER

The Moving Equilibrium:

Roles in Rural Social Work Practice

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WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY IN ST. LOUIS

THE MOVING EQUILIBRIUM:

ROLES IN RURAL SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

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Abstract

The statuses that a rural social worker occupies are discussed. These include the positions of professional, organizational employee, community denizen, and family member. Areas of strain among the statuses are identified and then some suggestions made for relieving the problems in occupying multiple statuses.

Introduction:

In the last few years, the demands on the rural practitioner have been of increasing interest in the social work literature.[1] Problems of isolation, of lack of resources, and of distance are often cited (e.g., Shepard, 1977; Mermelstein and Sundet, 1980; Webster and Campbell, 1978). While the special demands of the rural setting have been described, less has been written on the ongoing process through which the rural social service worker balances the needs of the disparate groups having claims on his/her time and energy. It is to this process that this paper is addressed. First, the demands on the worker will be presented, and second, the methods for meeting these requirements will be described.

The Demands on The Worker

Each rural worker can be viewed as occupying a number of statuses each with a number of roles associated with it. The priorities given to the roles and responsibilities of the worker will be different depending on the status that the worker occupies at the moment. A significant element in the successful delivery of rural services is the reduction of the strain that is a consequence of having to maintain the different statuses. For the purposes of this paper, the focus is on four major statuses: professional social worker; organizational employee; rural community denizen; private citizen/family member. Each of these statuses is an important and a central part of the individual's identity. However, the structure of reality that is built by one group may overlap the reality of the other groups without a consistent world view emerging. The social worker in rural areas is forced, therefore, to function in a number of different and differing social realities. The different groups may assign different priorities to the pool

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of worthy undertakings that a worker performs. Preventative services may be of particular importance to the community while prosecution of neglect cases may be rated highest by the social service agency.

A more difficult source of strain for the worker is the stress that occurs when two different "audiences" or groups are at odds about the definitions that are to be used in everyday life. Concepts of time, for example, may vary widely. A simple statement that one is going to do something now may mean very different things to one's different audiences: To the bureaucracy, it is today, as when one says that a home is being investigated while to the community "now" may be in the next week, e.g., when a community member says that they are prepared to be involved in a home-visit now. Professionally, "now" can encompass a whole year, as in the statement, "guidelines are now being readied" but to a child "now" means this minute ("I want to go now."). The problem for the worker is that statements directed to one audience may be misinterpreted by another. It is hard to explain to a family seeking assistance that if they had gotten their application in yesterday, they would have met agency eligibility requirements but that today, one day later, the same family does not meet the criteria. Time may be seen as a more fluid and flexible phenomenon by the family.

The cycles of peak activity vary from group to group. This can work to the advantage of the worker or can cause even greater strains. A rural community tends to follow a pattern that is set by the constraints of the physical environment. Activity may have to slow considerably when roads are too icy or snowy or impassable for some other seasonal reason. Moreover, activity tends to become more directed as the peak period of the local industry places special demands on the resources of the community. Schools in Maine have been adapted to the potato harvest and local banks to the logging season. There are great fluctuations throughout the economy of tourist centers as the season of peak activity ceases. Indeed the Miss America Contest was developed to extend the tourist season in Atlantic City for a week past Labor Day.

Social service agencies, especially those following a federal mandate, may have to adhere to a standardized quarterly schedule. Their routine does not allow for modification by the demands of a local, seasonal cycle. A classic example of the conflict that this can present is the case of the farm family that wishes to adopt but notifies the local worker that they cannot afford a home visit during the two weeks of harvest when they make the income that is to support the family throughout the coming year. The Social Welfare Department does not make allowances and schedules a visit to the family when they are not available. The worker in the local community is caught between the two.

The worker tends to have high visibility within the community and so the conflicts between peak job demands and peak personal demands may become another example of differing cycles that are a source of strain. Family stress is often high around holidays. This may increase a worker's emergency calls at just the point that the worker's own family needs more attention. It seems to be a corollate to Murphy's Law that not only will the worker's family be under stress, but that the strain will become apparent to the community. For example, a worker's children start acting up in church and become the local versions of "Dennis the Menace" around the neighborhood. At least it gives one empathy for clients and allows for the client to identify with the worker!

A third type of difference that is related to time is that the expectations that one has for the duration of relationships. Rural resident traditionally have known most of the members of their communities for many years and in a number of different settings. The butcher also may be a fellow booster of the local football team, a brother Kiwanian and a homeowner in the neighborhood. While the new boom towns in rural areas may not have this same high degree of social cohesion, there is still an expectation that relationships will have some continuity over time, at least in comparison to those in an urban setting. A social service agency may be based on an assumption that intervention should be immediate, intensive and of short duration. This type of intensive therapy may

be theoretically sound but situationally inappropriate. Forms of deference and informal courtship that are integral elements in the behavior of groups that maintain enduring, multifaceted relationships are not easy to reconcile with aggregate data or with intensive, short-lived intervention. The problem affects the whole of the professional web of helping practitioners in a community. When a worker seeks support from local law enforcement, court or district attorneys, and the local judge, that assistance may not be forthcoming. After all, these people also feel that they need to continue good relationships with the field if they are to be effective in their work. To put this in another way, to be useful professionally, the worker must be able to work in a manner that takes the social structure of the community into account.

In some locales, a worker's identity may be time limited. A person functioning as a Department of Family Services worker in an urban setting may be seen by others as a social worker while on the job but not necessarily after hours. By contrast, in a rural setting, a worker is likely to be seen as a social worker 24 hours a day. Calls may be referred not only after hours but also when one is out shopping or running errands. Some workers go to the extreme of driving to the next town to get groceries in order to avoid this. Whenever a professional is the only member of that profession in the community, there is a tendency to associate all of the individual's behaviors with his/her role as a professional. If the social worker is a Democrat, the reasoning is that all social worker's are similarly Democratic. The lifestyle and work of the individual may then form the identity of the profession and the bureaucracy for the community. Such a responsibility is hard to maintain.

Many rural workers report that there is a proper moment to intervene that may not be easily predicted. To some extent, this problem has already been discussed but another aspect deserves consideration. Passivity, deciding not to take action, may be an effective method for dealing with a problem. Particularly when a worker is trying to change attitudes about an endemic problem, one must choose the moment and the setting

very carefully. There is an old saying in South Carolina, "If you can't appeal to a South Carolinian on his morals, you can always appeal to his manners." Most rural communities are not rigid but traditional. Modifications will only be considered if presented by a socially acceptable person in "the proper context". Unfortunately, it is not easy to translate this on to a time line.

Tools for Reducing Role Strain

As presented so far, the model has focused on the areas of differing social realities of the groups to which the worker owes allegiance. These differences may or may not lead to conflicts that the individual worker must resolve. By chance alone, a certain percentage of the time, the differences are bound to lead to role strain.

The individual rural worker engages in the process of merging the various social identities to create a synthesis appropriate in a variety of settings. The process may be an imperfect one, but at least there are some tools to assist the worker in attempting to develop an "authentic" identity (Etzioni, 1968).

Rural-Based Professional Groups

A method for dealing with the diverse demands on the worker is to give emotional support through talking with people in similar situations. In the past, it has been assumed that since other social workers were not in the community, the worker was isolated professionally. Today, new concepts are emerging that change that picture. First, professionals in a number of helping professions are banding together to form rural support groups that are not only able to address the problems of the community in a dynamic manner but also are able to assist one another in ventilating frustrations and in the search for answers to practice dilemmas (Bertsche, 1980; Sefcik and Ormsby, 1978; Weinbach and Kuehner, 1981).

Second, rural workers are experimenting with old and new technologies to develop new ways of moving information rather than people. Increasing use is being made of methods of giving the rural worker access to the resources of the central office without actually having to go to the central location. In Iowa, the Central Information Delivery System is an audio teleconferencing/printing network linking the main office and the 16 district offices through a telephone system[2]. Through such a system, case management and case review become easier. Not only can the rural worker use the system for consultation with the distant supervisor but also can act as part of a management review team. Kansas is able to offer training that is available through audio-visual tapes and two-way conferences. Courses are also available through cable television.

In the future, telephones can be used not only for conferences but as a method for dictating information from a distance, and for developing access to computers that can assist in referrals. Case records can already be kept in a central location while entries and information retrieval are made by computers activated from a distant site.

In the next ten to twenty years, there will be the potential of having libraries on computer. The rural worker would then be able to use a video viewer for reading material rather than having to go to the library itself.

There are caveats with the use of these advanced technologies. Many agencies have invested in the equipment. There is not the same degree of attention being given to up-grading the synthesis of the available data. Also, there has not been an attempt to make the worker feel that the machine is an extension of the worker, not visa versa. Another caution is that it would be easy to assume that the rural worker has been discontented with rural practice. Most rural social workers have shown high satisfaction levels (Boo, Kim and Wheeler, 1978) despite the fact (or perhaps due to the fact) that the

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2 CIDS is a private line, 4-wire, dedicated circuit. It is equipped with dial selective signaling and Dacrome convenors-speaker/microphones. Sites in the field are equipped with Bell Dataspeed 40/1 receive only printers. The system was designed and is serviced by Northwestern Bell.

work is difficult. Technology is only one aid. Other strategies that rural workers are already using with success include exploiting indigenous resources and networks.

Rural Change and Consciousness

With the economic restructuring of the Reagan years, there is an increasing sense that the techniques being developed to serve the rural worker may serve as the basis for assisting urban and suburban workers in the future. The rural workers' isolation has been a form of freedom from some of the bureaucratic constraints that have beset others. The rural worker, therefore, is somewhat freer to experiment with new uses of old resources and with taking on new approaches to getting a job done (e.g., Deaton and Bjergo, 1977, "An appropriate role for social work: Small business development in the rural community"). This need to develop resources has important fringe benefits for it may serve as a model for the urban agency facing major losses of federal funds. The rural worker could thus be in the lead rather than at the tail end of the system of adaptation and change.

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